

**Giving It Up to God"**  
**Luke 4:31-41**  
**First Sunday in Lent—March 10, 2019**

*Where is Jesus when we need him? Our parent is diagnosed with a form of dementia for which there is no cure, and we feel helpless. Our spouse begins to forget who we are, and we feel left out of their story. Our friend breaks our heart with harsh words directed to the unseen presence in the hospital room, and we feel angry towards God. Hear what the Spirit is saying to us in this passage from the Gospel of Luke, the 4<sup>th</sup> chapter, beginning with the 31<sup>st</sup> verse:*

Jesus went down to Capernaum, a village in Galilee. He was teaching the people on the Sabbath. They were surprised and impressed—his teaching was so forthright, so confident, so authoritative, not the quibbling and quoting they were used to.

In the meeting place that day there was a man demonically disturbed. He screamed, "Ho! What business do you have here with us, Jesus? Nazarene! I know what you're up to. You're the Holy One of God and you've come to destroy us!"

Jesus shut him up: "Quiet! Get out of him!" The demonic spirit threw the man down in front of them all and left. The demon didn't hurt him.

That set everyone back on their heels, whispering and wondering, "What's going on here? Someone whose words make things happen? Someone who orders demonic spirits to get out and they go?" Jesus was the talk of the town.

He left the meeting place and went to Simon's house. Simon's mother-in-law was running a high fever and they asked him to do something for her. He stood over her, told the fever to leave—and it left. Before they knew it, she was up getting dinner for them.

When the sun went down, everyone who had anyone sick with some ailment or other brought them to him. One by one he placed his hands on them and

healed them. Demons left in droves, screaming, "Son of God! You're the Son of God!" But he shut them up, refusing to let them speak because they knew too much, knew him to be the Messiah.

I had the most wonderful lunch conversation with Jack Nordin a couple of days ago. We talked about things that matter and we talked about other things that don't matter so much. Jack is a wonderful lunch partner!

The talk turned to our memories of his beloved wife, Joyce, who died of Alzheimer's dementia just over 5 years ago now. I have his permission to speak about their story today.

I first met Joyce Nordin when I was at Parker UCC. She was already showing effects of the disease, but I remember her soft eyes and hesitant, small laugh. She was a wonderful person, a talented artist, a great partner for 58 years to the man who married her when they were just 21 years old. Jack laughed at the memory of a young father who had three children while he was still in graduate school.

The dementia took Joyce fast. In the six months in between when I left that church and the time when Hilltop UCC and Parker UCC reunited as one body of faith and practice, Joyce had lost her ability to speak. She remembered me though; I could see it in her eyes and in that wan, killer smile of hers. Jack and I laughed in soft tones at the memory of how on the day of my Installation as Pastor here, following the worship service

Joyce made a bee-line for my celebration cake, aiming with her hands to grab a piece for herself. Jack gently told her "no," that she needed to use a fork for the cake. She didn't understand why, but she sensed that he was looking out for her, and it was okay. He got her a big piece of cake and helped her eat it. She was happy.

I watched Jack over those next months as he cared for his wife. Their tale was an important lesson in grace. Jack walked with Joyce faithfully and care-fully the whole way through those final agonizing months until her death in November 2014. On January 31, 2015, with family and friends surrounding, we interred her ashes and committed her spirit to God's in a mix of tears and gratitude.

I am sure Jack was a mix of emotions as he watched his partner slowly fade away from him. He relived some of them as we shared our meal this past Friday. Grief has many stages: Dr. Elisabeth Kubler Ross & David Kessler in their classic book, *On Grief and Grieving*, identify five. They are: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance, "a part of the framework that makes up our learning to live with the one we lost. They are tools to help us frame and identify what we may be feeling. But they are not stops on some linear timeline in grief."

There's no such thing. There's no Savior that shows up in the middle of our angst to face off against the demon that shows up as any of the known dementias in the essential soul and spirit of our loved ones.

Dementia only takes one route—straight down. It is bad, it is horrible, it is scary, it is a thief without semblance of moral conscience. It is patently unfair, and it only gets worse. It is cruel and relentless. Where is Jesus with his magic wand when WE need his intercession for our loved ones?

I remember the day I knew definitely that something was horribly amiss with my Dad. He always was tormented by his demons, that was nothing new: he had nearly succumbed to alcoholism; he was a miserable financial failure who lost our family home to his excesses and mismanagement; he failed at two and some say three, marriages. He had difficult relationships with his children, some irreparably so. His anxieties and his insecurities always plagued him and made life challenging for those who loved him.

Yet, he was brilliantly talented as a stage director, a commercial film creator, an alcohol recovery and family therapist, and speaker. Once he got sober, he dedicated his life to helping others chase away their own demons, and he helped scores of people regain their lives.

That day, however, my Dad called me in a panic that I will not forget. I could barely make out what he was saying on the telephone. "Slow down, Dad, what's wrong?" I pleaded with him. Finally, I understood that he was in his car and he was lost. He had no idea where he was.

"Dad, describe what's around you so I can try to find you," I pleaded with him. He made no sense as he mentioned bricks and an exit sign and a

streetlight and a curb. He could be anywhere in the Denver Metro area with those markers.

I wasn't far from his office so I thought I would base there and see if I could find his calendar or a note about where he had gone. Honestly, I really didn't know WHAT to do! This was before the days of GPS systems on our phones and in our cars, before "Find my iPhone," or texting. I called Chris to come and help me, and I was getting ready to call my sisters as I pulled into his office parking lot.

Something caught the corner of my eye, a red car sitting around the corner. It was his car! He was parked at the back door to his office building. When I knocked on his window, grateful and relieved on the one hand that he had made it back to safe ground, and confused and angry on the other that he had wasted my precious time that day, I had no idea how life would irrevocably change for him, for his wife, and for his family, friends, and therapy patients that day.

As the story unfolded, he had been sitting behind his small office building for more than an hour, unable to recognize where he was. The puzzle pieces about his recent behaviors fell into place over the next few days.

When dementia strikes, the world stops spinning.

When dementia strikes, the hands on the clock move in a weird time warp where minutes and hours and days and months don't make any logical sense. Your loved one can seem pretty with it one day and totally out of it

the next. Your friend can recognize and laugh with you on Monday over the crazy stuff you used to do together and then scream accusations at you on Wednesday that you are stealing from her.

Your spouse can recite the Lord's Prayer perfectly on Friday and then not have any concept of God or Jesus or love or prayer by Sunday. That's how it works. And nobody drives the demons out of them. Not faith, not prayer, not righteousness.... not Jesus.

And so, like Jack, you learn the walk. You learn the new rules of the road. You learn not to argue with the dementia. You learn not to correct errors in grammar, in manners, in names, or in the days of the week or months or years in the calendar.

You learn to accept with grace the need to clean a messy bottom, the need to read the children's story to him so that he can fall asleep just like he did with his mother 80 years ago. You turn off the TV, the stereo, the coocoo clock, and your blasted cellphone, because distractions to a person with dementia are terrifying and in that second when you are not paying attention just like with a new crawling baby, disaster can and will happen.

You're on your own, kiddo. But if you let grace be your walking companion, you are not alone. If you let God's Spirit pace you, you are attended on the journey by the holy. And if you let yourself appreciate it, you are living in a moment that is sacred, for that veil which separates you from the Divine Mystery has never been thinner.

“Caregiving often calls us to lean into love we didn’t know was possible,” writes Tia Walker. I believe it. I’ve seen it and lived it.

We think from these Bible stories that Jesus has the power to cure disease. But the demons are not the disease. The demons are not the dementia or the mental illness or the behavioral problems. Those just are organic anomalies in the order of things. No, the demons are not the disease; the demons are the way people *perceive* the afflicted person, the way the care-givers give up on themselves or their loved ones, the way people give up on themselves.

Jesus brings love to the afflicted and to those who are afflicted alongside them. We want Jesus to display his divine power and cure the sick. But that’s not how it works. Jesus chases the demons away not by supernatural power, but by the gift of unconditional love. The people he “cures” are still afflicted with all the things you and I suffer. They still worry about their family, their finances, their standing with God, and their place in the world. They are rid of the demon, but they are still haunted by life lived as an imperfect being.

When the demons are gone from those healed, the complications remain. When a loved one shows signs of dementia, the life-game changes irrevocably. The demons begin to show themselves in our anxieties, embarrassment, worry, and grief. But Love chases away stigma, fear, loss of control, and desperation, leaving only grace and patience and care-giving,

a sacred walk in Lenten times with the person you love. And that, my friends, is the miracle. That, my friends, is giving it up to God.

*May It Be So.*